Save My Game

Dead Characters and the Campaign

By Jason Nelson-Brown

This column provides advice for DMs whose campaigns are in trouble. Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? Worry no more, because Jason Nelson-Brown has the answers to save your game!

To Raise or Not to Raise?

The twin topics for this installment of *Save My Game* are the effect that character death has on adventures and what happens to a dead character's treasure if he's not raised. Most PCs want to have their dead companions restored to life so that they can continue adventuring together. But sometimes they must make a choice between doing so and completing the adventure successfully. What's a DM to do?

Problem: What Happens to the Adventure When a Character Dies?

If it's acceptable to kill off PCs, how do you handle their absence from the adventure, whether temporary or permanent? If the players choose not to try life-restoring magic, how do you handle the disposition of the dead character's possessions?-Bart

In the last installment of *Save My Game,* we looked at the question of whether or not to kill PCs in your campaign. But even if you try your best to avoid PC death, it's likely to happen at least occasionally. So let's look at some of the key campaign issues that arise in such cases.

Solution 1: The Plot Must Go on

Every **D&D** adventure is an ongoing story with at least a general plotline, and in most cases, the planned action doesn't include trips back to town to get dead characters raised. So how can you handle this temporary deviation from your storyline? Must the PCs drop what they're doing to get their comrade brought back? Will they all go to town, or just a few of them? In the latter case, what will the rest of the party do in the meantime? Does the campaign simply stall while the party deals with a casualty?

If you're running an open-ended dungeon campaign, such as *Keep on the Borderlands* or *Ruins of Undermountain,* a temporary lapse in the action is no problem because the adventure always proceeds at the party's convenience. The site of the action is just a dungeon waiting to be cleared. If the party clears out rooms 1 through 19 and then the rogue is killed by the giant in room 20, the PCs can simply leave, raise her, and return to start up again in room 21 -- or perhaps in some other part of the dungeon. In such a case, the trip back to town is no big deal.

But the situation is different if the campaign has a timeline that calls for rapid-fire events. In that sort of adventure, PCs who take time off to have dead companions raised will fall behind, and such delays can have

potentially disastrous consequences. For instance, characters investigating an assassination plot may have to choose between reviving a comrade and preventing the intended murder if time is short. Or an evil cult may succeed in reviving its long-dead god with a forbidden ritual if not stopped in time. In such cases, parties that spend too much time going back and forth to town to resurrect dead comrades may fail to stop the bad guys in time.

If your adventures tend toward the latter type, you need to take a hard look at your DMing style and the kinds of scenarios you offer. If you choose to put time limits on success and you know you have a habit of killing characters, make sure to build in extra time so that PCs can get dead characters raised -- perhaps even several times, depending on the scale of the adventure.

Solution 2: What Happens to the Dead Guy's Stuff?

Suppose the party doesn't have the dead character raised. Then what happens?

In the archetypical fantasy death scene, the hero dies with his boots on and is buried with full battle honors. Also known as the Viking Funeral Rule, this approach to character death decrees that when a character dies, all his stuff "dies" with him. Items for joint party use -- such as healing potions or *bags of holding* -- that the dead hero might be carrying are exempt from burial, and exceptions can also be made for special "plot items" the dead character had that are needed to complete the mission. The general idea, however, is that heroes don't pillage their dead comrades.

But hey, this is a **D&D** game, not an adventure novel. "Waste not, want not" is the adventurer's creed, and treasure is treasure. Why stick your friend in the ground and let all that loot go to waste? That concept may not be very heroic, but adventuring is a war of sorts, and wars leave no time for pleasantries such as honorable burial. So the most common result is that the PCs strip the corpse and divvy up the loot, just as they would with any other dead person they came across.

This method, however, can throw off the balance of treasure in the party -- particularly if only the characters whose players happen to be present during that game session are included in the division. Even if the loot is divided among all the party members -- possibly after selling all the items for cash -- everyone still gets a pretty big chunk of change. After all, typical PC wealth tends to be higher than the net worth of the average monster or NPC.

But why should extra PC treasure present a problem for the campaign? The answer is that, assuming a party of four, each of the three survivors now has 1/3 more wealth than he really should. And since the replacement character who joins the party to bring its number back up to four also has equipment, you now have four characters with enough treasure for five. In that case, you might need to adjust the ELs for your encounters to reflect the fact that the PCs now have more resources than a typical party would.

The other problem is that the replacement character doesn't get a cut of the dead person's treasure and is therefore more likely to die than the survivors are. After all, even if the newbie is the same character level as the rest of the group, she has fewer resources with which to fortify herself. (The same is true for PCs who sell off possessions to fund resurrections -- they end up behind the rest of the party in terms of treasure.) In that sense, character death can be even worse for the player than for the character, because any replacement PC ends up behind.

To address this issue, you and your players should sit down and decide exactly what will happen in the

campaign when a PC dies. You can rule that each character must have a will that stipulates what happens to his possessions -- perhaps they will go to a relative who then becomes the replacement character, or to an organization. Party contracts or charters are also an option for dealing with the situation fairly. Or you can stipulate that the cultural values about the dead in the campaign require a certain disposition of goods. Whatever in-game solution you choose, everyone knows what will happen ahead of time, before any argument can ensue.

Summary

Character death can disrupt a storyline by forcing characters to choose between completing a timed mission and having a companion raised. To minimize such campaign effects, build in some extra time for trips back to town, or simply ensure that your adventures can occur at the characters' convenience.

Should the PCs decide not to raise a dead companion, they are likely to loot the body and split up the proceeds, thereby creating a treasure imbalance between themselves and any replacement PC. Such an imbalance raises the chances of death for the new character and forces the DM to adjust the ELs of encounters to account for the party's extra resources. A frank discussion of this prospect with the players is in order here, so that a logical in-game solution that does not unbalance the party can be found.

In the next installment, we'll talk about how to introduce and integrate a new character into the campaign. PC death is certainly not the only reason that new characters come into a campaign, but it's one of the more common ones.

About the Author

Jason Nelson-Brown lives in Seattle with his wife Kelle, daughters Meshia and Indigo, son Allen, and dog Bear. He is an active and committed born-again Christian who began playing **D&D** in 1981 and currently runs one weekly campaign while playing intermittently in two others.

©1995-2005 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Wizards is headquartered in Renton, Washington, PO Box 707, Renton, WA 98057.

Based on the original **Dungeons & Dragons®** game by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and on the new edition of the **Dungeons & Dragons** game designed by Jonathan Tweet, Monte Cook, Skip Williams, Richard Baker, and Peter Adkison. **D&D**, **Dungeons & Dragons**, and **Forgotten Realms** are registered trademarks owned by Wizards of the Coast, Inc. All Wizards characters, character names, and the distinctive likenesses thereof are trademarks owned by Wizards of the Coast, Inc. This material is protected under the laws of the United States of America. Any reproduction of or unauthorized use of the material or artwork contained herein is prohibited without the express written permission of Wizards of the Coast, Inc. This product is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual people, organizations, places, or events is purely coincidental. This Wizards of the Coast game product contains no Open Game Content. No portion of this work may be reproduced in any form without written permission. To learn more about the Open Gaming License and the d20 System License, please visit **www.wizards.com/d20**. ©2001-2005 Wizards of the Coast, Inc. All rights reserved. Made in the U.S.A.

Visit our website at www.wizards.com/dnd